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ABSTRACT

Students must reconsider the nature of composing and their identities as writers when working on a jointly authored piece of writing, such as a two-page report on a particular area in a university library. Looking at the ways workshop groups interact to produce a piece of collaborative writing and a joint oral presentation offers insight into the implications of writing as a social act, enabling cognitive growth and, ultimately, empowerment. The peer group must of necessity reach some consensus through a struggle to organize material into a two-page report and a 15-minute presentation. However, students must also face their differences and distinctions as they struggle to invent a pluralistic writing subject on their area of the university library in addition to making what they learn accessible to others. By demystifying the library for themselves and by negotiating the processes of joint authorship in which individual performance gives way to language as a social practice (i.e.group performance), students move into later assignments which require them to use resources outside the self, enabled by familiarity with library resources and some confidence about their abilities to find out what they need to know. Finally, they get a sense of what it is like to participate in the academic community through academic discourse. (A note to teachers on the library report is attached.) (MM)

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The Implications of Collaborative Writing: A Dialogue

When I assign a jointly authored piece of writing in my introductory composition classes--a two-page report on a particular area of our university library such as periodicals or reference or government documents--students must reconsider the nature of composing and their identities as writers. Their relationships to the text undergo change and it is this change and its potential benefits that I should like both to address and to speculate about as an offshoot of a specific form of collaborative learning--the joint production of a text.

What complicates both this event and the process involved is that the assignment takes place within the context of a course in which I am constantly urging students to take themselves seriously as individual writers with personal voices and unique bodies of knowledge to share through writing. I am trying to build up some degree of confidence in students who do not always have much confidence in their writing abilities. Yet, by assigning a piece of writing co-authored with the members of their peer group, it's as if after assuring them it's all right to use "I" in their papers, I've told them it's wrongheaded and they have to remove all "I's" from their texts. Just as students are beginning to get used to the discursive practices that justify and even demand linking the author to the text to give it authenticity,

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they are asked to generate a body of information and to write a text which constructs something other than what we usually consider as author: to borrow from Foucault's speculative treatment of author/text relationships, I ask students to consider " `author' as a function of discourse" (124). In effect, I ask students to engage in dialogic situations that take them from the internalized and intuited to the literal and the articulated in order to deal with the questions Foucault poses on the last page of his provocative essay, "What Is An Author?," when he writes that, instead of these familiar questions:

> "Who is the real author?"
>
> "Have we proof of his authenticity and originality?"
>
> "What has he revealed of his most profound self in his language?"
>
> New questions will be heard:
>
> "What are the modes of existence of this discourse?"
>
> "Where does it come from; how is it circulated; who controls it?"
>
> "What placements are determined for possible subjects?"
>
> "Who can fulfill these diverse functions of the subject?"
>
> Behind all these questions we would hear little more than the murmur of indifference:
>
> "What matter who's speaking?" (138)

Although they do not speak in Foucault's laden and specialized language, their responses reveal that students become intensely aware of the intricacies of the discourse practices they are

asked to engage in; they must consider matters of control and power as well as this version of Foucault's Beckett allusion "What matter who's speaking in this writing?"

Such inquiry into the problematics of authorship as well as attempts to devise writing practices to empower students within the university have only evolved since I began, several years ago, experimenting with ways to get students into the library so that they might have an experience to help them find resources and materials for written and oral presentations. Here is the assignment that I've been modifying and refining in order to break down the overwhelming dichotomy students generally experience between what Paulo Freire calls "the word-world and the real-world" (Pedagogy 36):

Collaborative Library Report: Search and Research in the Bailey/Howe

(Workshop Groups)

The purpose of this assignment is to give you an active experience researching the library's resources and facilities, especially as computer technology has brought about changes in the ways we access information. This knowledge will serve you well as you generate ideas, collect material, and conduct varieties of research for your upcoming argumentative essay. You will use your writer's notebook to keep a research log of all you do in the library and elsewhere to gather information for (1) a collaborative oral presentation on your assigned library area and (2) for a jointly written report that will appear as one of the pieces of writing in your mid-term portfolio due on October 15. (You will continue to keep the research log during the weeks you're working on the argument.)

Background Work in Bailey/Howe (October 1)

1) Group Area Assignments:
Reference (#1)
Computerized Services (#2)
Map Room (#3)
Government Documents (#4)
Special Collections (#6)

Periodicals, including special ways of storing information such as microfilm/microfiche (#6)

[As soon as you assemble with your group members, find a working space in your assigned area for Group Brainstorming Session.]

2) Group Brainstorming Session

USE NOTEBOOK TO KEEP RECORDS OF DISCUSSION BASED ON FOLLOWING:

- *** What we want to find out/what we need to find out?**
- *** Are there any helpful brochures?**
- *** List of specific questions to ask library staff.**
- *** Prepare written list of interview questions for next visit.**
- *** Make appointment with library staff for return visit.**

3) Researching the Bailey/Howe's Resources (Date or dates determined by each group)

- *** On appointed visit conduct interview with staff and gather as much additional information (dividing up the tasks if appropriate) from observation and questioning as possible.**
- *** Generate a preliminary written plan for oral presentation and for written report: 1) be sure each person participates in both activities; 2) if there is more rsearch to be done, be sure to schedule times and people to cover the neccessary work.**
- *** Are there special resources or formats you might use to make the oral presentation as interesting as possible?**

4) Presenting and Writing

- *** In-class Workshop Session October 6.**
- *** Sign up for group critique session on draft of written report with peer tutor at the Learning Cooperative.**
- *** Presentations of Collaborative Oral Reports in class October 13-15.**
- *** Written Collaborative Report due in portfolio October 15.**

Looking at the ways workshop groups interact to produce a piece of collaborative writing and a joint oral presentation offers insight into the implications of writing as a social act enabling cognitive growth and ultimately the degree of

empowerment that Freire describes as the process of learning to read and write: "Speaking the word is not a true act if it is not at the same time associated with the right of self-expression and world-expression, of creating and re-creating, of deciding and choosing and ultimately participating in society's historical process" (Politics 50). To introduce such a collaborative assignment regarding search and research in the University of Vermont's Bailey/Howe library after the opening month of classes throws something of a monkey wrench into what has been a carefully orchestrated routine of inventing/drafting/revising with both teacher and peer review and response on the essays-in-process a la Peter Elbow/Donald Murray. Although class writers have gotten used to the peer discussions with their ongoing development of necessary critical perspectives and to teacher conferences over the emerging pieces of writing, there is always a jolt of anxiety over the prospect of joint authorship, especially when the jointly authored writing is to become an official part of each writer's mid-semester portfolio. Things are never quite the same for the rest of the semester, either in the ways that peer groups interact or in the way writers treat and regard each other. The multiple interaction processes of this assignment stimulate a rapid decentering process that many resist yet come to appreciate and even understand.

In order to trace the kinds of changes that a collaborative writing assignment produces in its participants and to speculate about the implications of such writing as a social act with cognitive dimensions, requiring writers to engage in an unusually rich dialogue and dialectic, I will present what writers record

in their journals to document what happens while they are planning, interviewing, collecting, organizing, writing, and presenting their material. Their relationships to each other and their relationships to the writing and speaking project inform us about the complexities and values of learning to work with others in the writing class.

For both student and teacher, this way of doing things is surely messier compared to the way I used to introduce first year composition classes to the University of Vermont's Bailey/Howe Library. Our librarians had devised many useful ways to make it as painless as possible for composition teachers to introduce hundreds of students to the library through an array of services such as staff-directed tours, self-guided exercise tours, and videos starring other students as well as librarians. But no matter how diligently we went through the various well-intentioned programs, my students' eyes glazed over in a numbness that seemed only to distance them further from using the library with some understanding of its function to them and their need for its empowerment in their educational lives.

Most remained like characters in that Borges fiction, "The Library of Babel," in which "To locate book A, consult first a book B which indicates A's position: to locate book B, consult first a book C, and so on to infinity . . . In adventures such as these, I have squandered and wasted my years" (56). In other words, students remained powerless and even helpless when it came to making the library their own tool and instrument for knowing. They entered the libary as passive objects and they left without

the means to become actively engaged as subjects learning and questioning how knowledge is categorized and organized. As some express below, the library in its combined size and mystery intimidates those very people who may need its services and resources most.

Certainly initiating an interaction through the production of a jointly authored text has unsettled many first year students' notions
about both learning and writing. Here's the way one student puts it:

> Last night our group went to the Writing Center at the Learning Co-op for our discussion on our group project dealing with the library. I don't know but I've never been able to feel confident working with others at various tasks & school work is one task. The problem is that when I work, I think my own way & I like to approach topics from my own perspective. When we were writing it up (our paper) I did some of the writing. I found it tough to take dictation & compile my thoughts & write at the same time. Perhaps two people would start talking at once on the same topic, one starting from one angle, the other from the other side and me trying to sort all of this out into one cohesive thought. It seems to me easier to do it by oneself. It's not that I have a problem or fear of getting a worse grade. It doesn't matter to me if the person has a super high I Q or not, it's just that I feel confident doing my own work.

The reservations and even anxiety this student expresses about doing a written and oral project with others in his writing class represent what most students initially feel when they find out that one of their portfolio pieces will be co-authored with four or five others. This way of doing things appears messy in the academic context in contrast to what the student calls "the real world," as he describes it:

> Actually, when all is pulled together, the works usually look good yet I always have a small nagging in my head saying, "Don't you think maybe you could have written it better yourself?" I think this is a problem I must overcome. In order for me to do well later on I must be prepared to work with others. I think working in a group only threatens me when it comes to school work. I've seen the efficiency of team work all over the place. When I was in ninth grade I had to rebuild an engine with my friend for my power mech class. I never would have been able to do it had we not been working as a team. I've seen the efficiency of splitting up tasks when collating papers and building & painting houses. It's just that in the real world it seems more natural to work as a team than it does in school where one is based on his/her individual performance instead of his/her performance as a team.

Significantly, here the student writer examines what it's like to write with others within the context of tasks that share

a social and collaborative dimension. He's seeing collaborative authorship--a shared language activity--as what Kenneth Gergen calls a "constituent[s] of social practice[s]" engaged in generating knowledge that "is not something people possess somewhere in their heads, but rather, something people do together" (270). Indeed, the student writer even anticipates Gergen's speculation that eventually we may "cease inquiry into the psychological basis of language . . . and focus on the performative use of language in human affairs" (270). Surely this student has made an important connection between a joint writing project and other socially negotiated tasks. The library becomes the site where students work together to appropriate knowledge that they in turn share with their colleagues: what occurs in the forms of dialogue or conversation with co-authors, with a peer tutor at the writing center, with librarians, with an emerging text, with the class at large through the oral presentation and follow-up questions, and, on occasion, with the teacher places language at the center of discovering what the library is and how it functions so that students are involved in the process of recreating the library itself. No longer is it totally Borges' "Library of Babel" unravelling texts mysteriously into a chaos of infinity.

The journal entry cited at some length above also typifies the intial reservations most students express about the group project because they are used to doing school work individually, especially those things that involve reading and writing and speaking for grades. And even any collaborative activities they may have done in school did not involve writing a public text.

Another student observes: "I think it's very difficult to write collaboratively with a group of people. It's hard to schedule a meeting time. . . . You can have five different thoughts and styles incorporated into one two page paper. Although, this can also be another difficulty because some ideas may be so different from one another that they conflict." Even at the end of the project, students still made observations such as " The work we did in Special Collections I actually enjoyed more than I thought I would. Trying to gather information was interesting and fun . difficulty of trying to maneuver amongst all our ideas . . . became the hindrance." But another insists afterwards that "The advantage of working in a group is that it enlarges the pool of ideas. Also, it gives one a testing ground for one's own ideas." Another student is more vehement at the outset: "Personally I don't like writing with other people. It's nothing personal. I just have ways that I like to write and how I write. I have my own specific ways of brainstorming, organizing, writing and revising. . . . But then again . . .I'm open to new things and this is definitely new to me so we'll see, it may be fun." As this student considers her own approaches and individuality as a writer, the curiosity to try something different also has its appeal.

Many students found the prospect of wending their way around a sizeable university library as a group and in a group to be comforting, diminishing the intimidation factor: "I think it is good that we are doing research in the library because I have no idea where anything is in the library. After hearing other

people's oral reports in class will help me with future encounters in the library." Another says: "I think that this will be a good way to learn about the library and at the same time help us to learn to work with others."

What actually happens as students learn to work together to produce a single piece of writing and its accompanying oral presentation resembles what Joseph Harris describes in a recent CCC article, " The Idea of Community in the Study of Writing" with its emphasis on dissonance and polyphony. While the peer group must of necessity reach some consensus through a struggle to organize material into a two page report and a fifteen minute presentation, students must also face their differences and distinctions as they struggle to invent a pluralistic writing subject and their area of the university library in addition to making what they learn accessible to others. It's as if the dissonance students allude to in their evaluations of jointly producing a text exemplifies language as a social practice that integrates Harris's speculation about the nature of academic discourse, that "we might be better off viewing it as polyglot, as a sort of space in which competing beliefs and practices intersect with and confront one another. One does not need consensus to have community" (20).

Since this jointly produced text comes early in the semester, it serves as a statement about the significance of accessing knowledge in the research situation. These students engage in knowing as a process, what Freire calls "an act of knowledge" (Politics 114) rather than what he describes

as "an alienating transference of knowledge" (Politics 115). By demystifying the library for themselves and by negotiating the processes of joint authorship in which individual performance gives way to language as a social practice--a group performance, students move into later assignments which require them to use resources outside the self enabled by familiarity with library resources and some confidence about their abilities to find out what they need to know. At least this seems to be the prevailing attitude as this student puts it: "I have always hated classes where you come in, sit down, & the prof tells you (DICTATES) what you are supposed to know. From past experience I have found that the best way to learn is by doing--by being part of the process." By writing this library report with others, first year university students take on, in a limited way, a piece of academic practice in research and writing centered on a powerful site that represents a measure of the university's power and knowledge in their lives.

Naming the structure of a designated area of the library appropriates a bit of that power and knowledge for students themselves as they find ways to survive and even to learn at the University of Vermont. One peer group can write to their classmates the "Special Collections is a good resource because each collection is useful in research. For example, if one were studying acid rain and its environmental effects on Vermont, the Wilbur collection is beneficial. One could also find in the manuscript collection letters from soldiers written to their families during the Civil War. Photographs and postcards well describe the development of Vermont's towns. . . ." And finally,

they get a sense, first-hand, of what it is like to participate in what Clifford Geertz characterizes as one community of "multiply connected individuals" (157) that make up the contemporary university--and they get to invent a piece of the university through academic discourse.

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A Note to Teachers on the Collaborative Library Report

During the years I have been making this assignment I have picked up some useful tips that smooth the way for both instructor and students, especially with regard to logistics. Certain activities helps prepare students before they even enter the library: for example, during the class before the first library visit, I have students engage in a brainstorming session in their peer groups to practice asking the kinds of questions that might generate important information once they are in the library; also, they can generate questions for interviewing library staff there or in the library later.

Then, it's important to work with librarians and the library staff to make sure each libary visit is productive. Before the semester begins or in the first week, I check with the librarians to be sure the scheduled visit of the whole class is on a day that suits the staff, because the students will immediately begin work as peer groups in their assigned area of the library. (I also send the library staff enough copies of the assignment for each major area of the library to have one.) Students will use that scheduled period to find out the location of the area, to familiarize themselves with an overview of materials, and to schedule an appointment for an interview with a library staff member. They will need to meet in the area as many as three more times to gather all the necessary information for their oral presentation and for the written report. The library staff appreciates knowing these meeting dates ahead of time.

Another important part of the collaborative writing process is scheduling with the Writing Center Director so that each peer group can meet with an experienced peer writing tutor in the late afternoon or evening after they composed a written draft. This part of the assignment has a two-fold purpose: to provide the groups with a model critiquing session with a Writing Center tutor and to give them another interactive segment in a series of interactive processes. Also, the writing tutor, through questioning, always encourages students to return to the library for further information for richer development of their pieces. Many return to the Writing Center for response to their individual papers throughout the remainder of the semester because they have seen for themselves how useful the service is for their writing development.

Finally, the piece of writing is never as lively or as interesting as the oral presentation. Students devise many ways--talk show formats, panels, skits, audio visual materials--to enliven oral presentations, but have a much harder time making the written report go beyond the informative. There is so much material to select from that they have a tendency to stick with what's safe and general. But, I believe what they have to learn to negotiate makes it a worthwhile writing assignment.